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SONS OF THE BRAVE



CHAPTER 1.

In the Woods of Deepdene.

THE dying day was breathing its sweetness upon the earth, and the breeze had sunk to a mere murmur.

Maid Marian's heart was full of joy. She had kissed the lips of her lover again, and he—Robin Hood—surrounded by his followers, sons of the brave every one, sat at a short distance while Maid Marian and her ladies danced on the greensward.

There was nothing formal in this dance. It was as natural as it was graceful. Dainty feet wandered hither and thither, and lithesome bodies swayed to and fro, as do the green rushes growing at the edge of a crystal pool.

"Love of my heart," said Robin Hood, as the soft strains of the lute ceased and the dancers stopped. "Life of my life, you are sweeter than ever. Come, tell me what hopes and fears assailed you while I was away on our latest adventure."

"Every night I dreamed of you," Marian replied, "but before I closed my eyes I prayed that you might be spared to me. And every morning when the sun bade me wake I prayed again, and my heart was full of hope. But oh, Robin, dearest and bravest of men, when dark clouds crept across the sky and the lightning flashed through the forest, then I feared for you."

"Poor Marian!" Robin Hood murmured, drawing

her closer to him. "It is always cruel to leave you, but when duty calls I must obey."

"In the voice of the storm I heard the din of battle," Marian continued. "In the lightning I saw the steel, and in the thunder I heard the crash of falling walls. Then I feared indeed; but soon the clouds would break, the sun shine forth, and then I hoped again. And what joy it was to see Will Scarlet bounding like a deer to us, bringing the news that we were to come to you here! Oh, Robin, I can say no more. Bid me good-night, for it is time that I and the women went to our bowers to sew and spin as long as the light lasts, and then to rest, for my joy has made me weary."

The men rose and saluted as Maid Marian and her attendants walked towards what appeared to be a lane, with branches of trees overhead.

The place had been specially prepared, and beyond this short lane or avenue was a retreat as wonderful as it was beautiful. A great ash-tree had fallen, tearing up the earth and forming a kind of cave. Underfoot grew yielding moss, ankle deep; and here the foresters had brought the simple couches and pillows of down for Robin Hood's sweetheart and attendants.

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Friar Tuck had gone to the nearest village, some seven miles away, to purchase certain articles and to replenish his stock of medicines.

He had thought it best to go alone, for although the people of Deepdene might not know Robin Hood or any of his men, some stranger might recognise the well-known Lincoln green, and raise an alarm.

And so the friar wended his way back through the woods, walking at the side of his beloved ass, Balaam. This sagacious animal was packed almost up to its ears with bags and bales and packages of all shapes and sizes.

Not once had a snort of discontent come from Balaam's nostrils, nor an angry look from his wicked eyes.

Friar Tuck had "blazed" the trees, and keeping an account of the number of marks, concluded that he was within two miles of Robin Hood's camp.

"They say—or, at least, so fools tell," Friar Tuck said, as he picked his way over the ground, "that an ass has no sense. Now, by my faith, I vow that if I had attempted to ride Balaam so far for my own pleasure, he would have sent me flying into some prickly bush. But he knows that in the packages he carries there are all sorts of good things for our merry men, including shoes for brave Robin and gaily-coloured cloth for the women."

At that moment Balaam stopped and so did Friar Tuck, for on a fallen tree, shorn of its branches by the woodmen some time during the previous winter, sat a curious creature, rolled almost into a ball.

On closer inspection Friar Tuck saw that it was a man huddled knees and chin together.

He was clad in motley, wore the cap of a jester, and jingled a kind of toy consisting of a curiously-shaped doll's head and bells.

"How now, jester?" said Friar Tuck. "Why out so late—and why this attitude? Are you trying to make a hedgehog of yourself?"

"Friar," the jester replied, "you ask too many questions. Answer me this: What do you in the woods of Deepdene?"

"I go my own way," Friar Tuck responded sharply.

"Ah, me!" sighed the jester, raising his knees again. "What will become of poor Simon Patch?"

"Who is Simon Patch?" asked the friar.

"Who should he be but myself," said the jester. "But do I look like telling a funny story, or making lords and ladies laugh? Faith, no; I am Sir Numbchance now. For why? Shall I tell you?"

"As you will," said Friar Tuck. "But you must walk at my side, for I must haste."

Simon Patch got down from his perch, and then Friar Tuck, seeing him better, noted that he was a dried-up little man with a good-natured, comical face, round, blue eyes, and a mouth that had acquired the knack of expanding or contracting according to its master's state of mind.

It was a mere buttonhole now, albeit slightly drooping at the corners.

"I take it that you are a stranger," he said, "and therefore know nothing of the Black Wolf?"

"That is more than you wot of," Friar Tuck thought. "But this is luck indeed! For what should bring Robin Hood to Deepdene but the Black Wolf himself?"

He kept the thought to himself and nodded his head in a manner that might imply anything, and Simon Patch went on speaking.

"The Black Wolf," he said, "is lord and baron of Deepdene. He is a miser, a thief; he has the evil eye, and a devil in his heart!"

"A fine combination, truly," quoth the friar. "But, Simon Patch, list to me. Perchance you give him a bad character because he and you have disagreed."

"Gramercy!" exclaimed the jester, "if I did but get within the clutch of his iron hand he would twist my neck like a pullet's. No, the baron and I have exchanged no words. He laid siege to the castle of my good master, Sir John Claire, threw him into a dungeon, and stole all that he could lay his hands upon!"

And not content with that," continued Simon Patch, groaning, "the Black Wolf has called upon every man to pay toll, and serve him in time of war, or whenever it shall be his will to sally forth to slay and steal."

"And pray where is the Black Wolf now?" demanded Friar Tuck.

"In my poor master's castle, overturning all things in his search for aught that can be turned into money. Friar, I came away, I fled for my life, for what could a little man like me do single-handed? I know the secret ways of the castle, but dare not show my nose into it. At every landing and on every wall there is a Norman breathing death and slaughter."

"You tell me a dreadful tale," Friar Tuck said. "But be not so chapfallen, Simon Patch. Robin Hood already has a father confessor, and so perchance he might find work for a jester, for no man loves a hearty laugh better than the King of Sherwood Forest."

"You talk of Robin Hood as if he were near," said Patch.

"Why not, since I am Friar Tuck."

"What, the Fighting Friar of Sherwood? You take my breath away!"

"I have it not, so cannot return it to you. You will find it somewhere low down in your throat. Yes, my little friend, I am called the Fighting Friar, but I am a man of peace."

"Then men are liars. They tell of your having beaten Norman knights—ay, and killed them, too—with your quarter-staff."

"I confess," said the friar, looking out of the corners of his eyes, "that on rare occasions, when men who delight in war have come full tilt at me, I have acted in self-defence with some effect. And moreover, Patch, I have, when roused to anger—although a man of peace, mind you—given a tyrant a nasty knock and even fought in the ranks of Robin Hood. Now, list to me," he continued, seizing Simon Patch suddenly by the arm. "I have no reason to think that you are a spy, but I will not let you go. Before the stars shine out of the blue that is deepening above our heads, you shall see Robin Hood. He shall tell you that the Black

Wolf and no other man brought him to the woods of Deepdene."

"I am all amazement," cried Simon Patch, his mouth now large and gaping. "'Twas only yesterday that the Black Wolf and his retainers broke through the walls of Sir John's castle, and reduced such of the garrison as he did not slay to slavery."

"That may be so; but Robin Hood has heard of other iniquitous deeds committed by the Black Wolf of Deepdene, and hither he has come to punish him and redress wrongs."

"Stop!" cried Simon Patch. "I want to go down on my knees and thank Heaven for this."

"There will be time enough to pray when we reach the camp. We are so near it now that I will give the signal." He raised his voice and let forth the cry of an owl—"Too-whit! Too-whoo!"

"Too-whit! Too-whoo!" came back like an echo.

"By the motley that I wear, you are owls as well as men!" said Simon Patch.

"You will find little of the owl about any man yonder; so have a care how you let your tongue wag," Friar Tuck remarked warningly.

At that moment a light gleamed through the trees. It made a circle and then went out, leaving the gathering gloom all the deeper.

"Now will I show you our baby forester," said Friar Tuck. "Ho, this way, Little John! I have brought you a playmate."

The giant, bearing his tremendous axe over his shoulder, came striding into view, and so alarmed was Simon Patch at the towering being that he uttered a cry of horror and tried to run away.

"Welcome, friar! Thrice welcome!" said Little John, not noticing Simon Patch for the moment. "Ay, and welcome, too, Balaam, although it is your custom to take sly bites at me when I am not looking. Be still, brute, and I will relieve you of the greater part of your burden."

"Come forth, Simon Patch," Friar Tuck said to the jester, who was hiding behind his gown. "What, are you afraid of our big baby? This is Little

John, who never uses his axe for anything more dreadful than lopping down trees, unless a Norman gets in his way."

"What is this you have brought with you?" demanded the giant.

"Something to make you laugh."

"I am laughing at it now," said Little John. "It is alive, I suppose? What did you pay for it?"

"It, as you call me," said Simon Patch, plucking up courage, "has not a head like a great billy-goat, nor a voice like a bull, with a new ring through its nose. My big friend, an empty barrel makes a deal of noise, but no sound ale flows from it."

"What, call you me empty barrel?" cried Little John. "Why, I have a mind to take you between my finger and thumb and toss you over my shoulder."

"And if I ran between your legs I could trip you up and send you sprawling," said Patch. "Friar, let me go. I will return to the tree I marked for sleeping in. This man is a bully."

"Nay, nay; you know him not," said Friar Tuck reassuringly. "Little John is all kindness, and means no harm. Come, yonder sits Robin Hood. Go tell him your story, and I'll warrant that you'll never repent of so doing."

CHAPTER 2.

A Captive in his Own Castle.

THE Norman baron whom men called Black Wolf sat at his morning meal. He ate now of this viand, and now of that, gobbling down his food in a manner that disgusted the attendants compelled to wait upon him.

Facing the baron was a window, or, more properly speaking, an opening in the thick wall. During the siege of this, Sir John Claire's castle, the bars had been beaten and torn away, and men were now repairing them.

"And so, Hildron," said the Black Wolf, "the people grumble and growl at the thought of serving me, do they? Well, perhaps they will think better of it when they see Sir John Claire's body dangling from the top of the keep. Perchance it would be as well to bring in some of these grumblers, and see

whether a little molten lead dropped into the palms of their hands will bring them to their senses."

The idea so tickled the Baron of Deepdene that it put him into quite a good temper for a few minutes.

He threw his head back and roared with laughter as another idea struck him.

"It could not be better, and it shall be done!" he cried. "Ho, there! Where is Lansonne, my servant? Summon him, and bid him come quickly if he would keep his ears."

The man named came rushing up the winding stairway as soon as the word was passed for him.

"Lansonne, you dog," said the Black Wolf, "go fetch scrip, inkhorn, and pen, and write out invitations to all my new tenantry, their wives, and maidens. I am in a mind that they shall dine with me to-morrow. I will have the banqueting-hall full from end to end. There shall be music and dancing to merry tunes, and then, by my sword, if they do not down on their knees and acknowledge me as their lord and master, there shall be other sorts of music and dancing to tunes that are not merry."

Lansonne, the scrivener, or scribe, knew that a remark likely to upset the Black Wolf might cost him his life; but he was on the horns of a dilemma, for being a stranger to the neighbourhood, he did not know the names of half a dozen people.

"To whom am I to address the invitations?" he demanded, sinking on one knee.

"For that matter," replied the Black Wolf, beginning to grind his teeth, "have you not the sense to pick out the best-built houses and leave the invitations at them? Take a dozen men-at-arms with you, lest someone of this Saxon scum should think fit to rid the world of so miserable a man."

Lansonne thought that such a thing was within the bounds of probability if he went alone into the countryside, and he had already pictured his wretched body lying lifeless and uncared for in some pond or thicket.

"To work, you snivelling villain—to

work!" roared the amiable nobleman, turning a pair of tigerish eyes upon the unhappy scrivener. "And when you have done scraping your pen, go forth and bring me word what says this rabble to my offer of hospitality. By Cerberus! if they do not come I'll fetch them, and at the point of the sword."

Lansonne made haste to obey. The baron could not write himself—a not uncommon defect among the nobility of those early days—so while he threatened and bullied the scrivener, he was compelled in a measure to trust him.

Attended by twelve men-at-arms on horseback, Lansonne duly left the castle. Never had man such a distasteful mission to perform.

"My lord, the Baron of Deepdene," he said to the first yeoman he handed a strip of parchment to, "desires the pleasure of your company at dinner to-morrow two hours before curfew."

"Go back and tell your master that I hope his first mouthful of food may choke him," was the curt reply.

Most of the yeomen were of Saxon blood, and Lansonne met with such poor success that he was driven to fastening some of the invitations to doors, which more often than not were slammed in his face.

At length, driven to desperation, he determined to dive deeper into the woods of Deepdene, where dwelt a rougher class of people who perhaps might think it an honour to sit below the salt at the baron's table.

Indeed, it mattered but little who came, for the Black Wolf was not likely to take much heed of his guests.

Keeping to the bridle-path and wagon-track that wound its way for miles through the woods, Lansonne and the men-at-arms jogged along until they beheld two stalwart fellows clad in russet brown.

One was wiping his brow after the exertion of felling a tree; the other was lopping off branches and tying them into bundles.

"Good-morrow," said Lansonne, grinning through his lantern jaws; "I greet you in the name of Baron Deepdene. Overjoyed with his success over that arch-traitor, Sir John Claire, he bids

you come to his table two hours before curfew to-morrow's eve. See! here is an invitation."

The man who was resting held out the piece of parchment at arm's length, while the other looked over his shoulder.

"My faith!" said he, "I suppose it is all fair; but since we cannot read, it may mean anything—even our death-warrants. I, Thomas Flax, and my man here, Dick Bourne, are free men, for as you see, we do not wear the yoke of bondsmen. What say you, Dick? Shall we taste the baron's fare?"

"Why not?" responded Dick Bourne. "Surely the baron will help himself to anything he may require. There'll be taxes enough, trust me, so we will get all we can before the plunder begins."

Lansonne laughed low down in his throat.

"Our friends here joke," he said, turning to the men-at-arms, "so let their words run like water out of your ears. The baron desires to be at peace with all people."

"We will come," said Thomas Flax. "Doubtless we shall see many more."

"There will be a goodly company, trust me," Lansonne replied. "Know you of any more honest men who will help to make a truce with the baron?"

Flax jerked his thumb over his shoulder. Said he:

"There are some hard-working people yonder, but they fear the Norman noble so lately claiming the land. They say that he has no title save the word of Prince John, and, moreover, they call him the Black Wolf. How has he earned such a name?"

"From idle report," Lansonne responded, looking anywhere but into the eyes of the Saxon. "The baron is all gentleness to such as obey him, but he punishes all who take up arms against him. Why not?"

"Why not, indeed?" said Dick Bourne, pitching one of the faggots aside. "Well, we thank you kindly, and will be at the castle at the appointed time."

"So fare you well," Lansonne rejoined, waving his hand. "But stay yet a moment. There has come to my

ears that a band of strangers are wandering about the woods. Know you aught of them?"

"Men come and go at all seasons," Dick Bourne said, stooping to tie up a fresh bundle. "We trouble not our heads about them so long as they do not molest us. But, by the rood! if they steal, they have to answer for their sins, be they Normans or Saxons."

"It is time that we were away," Lansonne said, pulling his horse round. "Spread the news, friends. Invitation or no invitation, the baron's castle will be Liberty Hall to-morrow e'en."

No sooner were the scrivener and his men-at-arms out of sight, when the two Saxon woodmen seized each other's hands and danced about like a pair of children let loose from school.

These men were none other than Dick Driver and Ned Carter, two of Robin Hood's famous men, and in meeting with Lansonne many difficulties had been removed.

The castle stolen from Sir John Claire would be practically open to all comers for the banquet on the morrow, and surely Robin Hood and his merry men would not fail to be there.

While Lansonne, feeling certain that there would be no lack of company at the castle, was wending his way back, thankful that his ears would not be in danger when he met the Black Wolf, that monster, attended by his executioner and torturer, was making a tour of the dungeons.

He had taken many prisoners, both men and women.

"Here lies Sir John Claire, gnawing his knuckles for want of better employment," said the Black Wolf, brutally, stopping before a great arched door, "I have some grains of comfort to bestow on him, so let me pass in; and, Hildron, do you keep close to me with your sword ready, for I have heard of desperate men beating out a gaoler's brains with their chains."

"He is close enough to the wall," Hildron replied, smiling grimly. "He cannot stand, and it is about as much as he can do to lie down."

"How have you fed him?"

"With black bread and water," Hil-

dron replied. "He seemed to have no appetite for such fare, but I trow that he will call for more ere the day is gone."

As the great door opened inwards a number of red-eyed rats rushed, squeaking, across the dungeon floor.

Hildron bore a torch, and the flare fell upon the form of a handsome young man, over whose light and curly head two-and-twenty summers had scarcely flown.

His armour, beaten out of all shape during the fray, had been torn from his body to make room for the cruel chains his captors had loaded him with; his long hose of blue cloth were stained with blood, and his left arm hung helpless at his side; but his splendid eyes had lost none of their fire.

"Sir John," said the Black Wolf, "I admire your courage and spirit, and regret that the base blood of a Saxon flows in your veins. If you had listened to reason when I summoned you to surrender, I might have spared you."

"Might!" echoed Sir John, bitterly. "When did the Black Wolf spare man, woman, or child that gave him the least offence? Baron, you are well named. The wolf is savage and treacherous, and so are you; the wolf is vile and filthy in its habits, and so are you!"

"Hildron," said the baron, "I will not give way to anger for reason of anything this pitiful wretch may say. Still, he must be taught not to abuse me, so prick him with your dagger."

"Monster!" cried Sir John Claire as Hildron's dagger pierced the shoulder of the disabled man. "Wolf of Deepdene, black-hearted beast, do your worst. Though I die, I trow my death shall be avenged!"

The baron enjoyed the scene. It was to his taste, and he rubbed his hands with fiendish glee as the knight's face twitched with pain.

But no cry for mercy came from Sir John. He was too noble of soul and heart to plead to his ruthless enemy.

"What say you, Hildron?" said the Black Wolf. "Think you that he will stand the ordeal by fire just now?"

Hildron made no reply aloud. In-

stead he stole to his master's side and whispered a few words in his ear.

"You know best," said the Black Wolf. "Let it be as you desire. Listen, Sir John," he added. "I have to say with you."

"I hear you; I am compelled to listen," the knight replied.

"We feast to-morrow in grand style," the baron said, drawing nearer to his helpless prisoner. "A number of men, once your tenants and retainers but now mine, will sit at my board, and after the viands are removed I have arranged for a great show. Can you guess what is in my mind?"

"I know nothing and care as much," the Saxon knight replied, contemptuously.

"It is best that I should enlighten you," the Black Wolf replied, bringing his face so low that his hot breath fell upon Sir John Claire's cheek. "I'll have you flogged like a common churl; and then, in sight of your own retainers, you shall die."

"Tyrant, you shall see how a Saxon can meet his end, in the full assurance that his murder will be avenged!" the knight replied.

"Who shall rob me of my revenge?" the Black Wolf demanded, trembling in his fury. "For every Saxon hind that comes to gorge and swill, there shall be two armed men to strike him dead if he do but murmur. Think of it! Think of it alone! The hours, long as they may be to you, will soon slip by. Prepare for the feast! It will be a merry show, I promise you! Come, Hildron; we will go."

"And take my bitterest curse with you!" Sir John Claire cried, raising himself on his elbow. "The Wolf dares not meet a foe in the open. He hunts in packs and devours his kind. Yelp on, beast! The time will come when you will be made to pay for your gross sins."

"If I listen to more I shall strike him dead where he sits!" the baron hissed. "Let us away, Hildron. My heart rages like a furnace fanned by the wind. Away—away, or I shall spoil the sport I have promised myself to see."

The Black Wolf and Hildron hurried from the dungeons. As they reached the top landing and passed through a door into the courtyard they were assailed by a sudden cry for help.

A young and lovely woman was struggling in the grip of two black-bearded ruffians.

"What! more beauty come to grace our castle?" cried the Black Wolf. "Unhand her! I see that she would speak to me."

The girl, with her golden hair all tossed and awry, sank at the baron's feet and clutched the rich velvet gown he wore over his armour.

"Sir," she said, with tears streaming from her eyes, "I know not what this may mean. I am Lady Edith Haverland, and my troth is plighted to Sir John Claire. I came hither, riding full six leagues with two of my attendants, whom your men slew scarce had they entered the castle, and I—I——"

She broke down and sobbed in the anguish of her full and gentle heart.

"I see," said the baron, striking her hand from his gown, "you do not know what has happened. Sir John Claire is no longer master of this castle. Your lover is my prisoner, and to-morrow he dies."

"What has he done to offend you?" demanded Lady Edith, sobbing between each word.

"He has offended the State and defied the laws imposed by Prince John," the Black Wolf replied. "I, Baron of Deepdene, was sent to punish him, and he is drinking the cup of his reward to the dregs. But dry your eyes, fair maiden. I am rough and uncouth to look upon, but I have a gentle heart which is easily moved to softness when blue eyes beam upon me."

"Oh, Heaven!" cried Lady Edith, starting to her feet. "Let me go! I am sick—giddy. Let me go, I say, or I shall go mad!"

"Nay, pretty one, I cannot let you go," said the baron. "This sudden news has affrighted you; but you will soon be calm—ay, and learn to thank me for ridding you of such a puling fool as Sir John Claire."

"Wretch! If you had the heart of a

man worthy of the name, you would not talk thus to a defenceless woman," Lady Edith Haverland said.

Sweeping away her tears, she stood before the baron, resolute, defiant, the embodiment of a noble and virtuous girl.

"And pray how would you escape me if I let you go?" the Black Wolf asked. "No door of this castle flies open without a word of command from me. Tush, child! You shall be my prisoner, yet withal my honoured guest. Give me your hand, and let me lead you to an apartment where you may ponder over the folly of this anger."

Overcome with horror and loathing, Lady Edith Haverland snatched a small dagger from her girdle and turned the point towards her breast; but the Black Wolf seized her wrist and averted a tragedy.

"Nay," he cried, "you are much too lovely to die! Come with me. No? I say you shall!"

"Help! help!" Lady Edith shrieked, as the baron commenced dragging her along. "Is there no man here to strike this monster dead? Help! help!"

At this stirring appeal a man who had been one of Sir John Claire's retainers stepped forward.

"Baron," he said, "I was taught to fight with men and not with women. I have a mother and sisters, and would consider it no crime to slay the man who insulted them. Unhand the girl, and let her go!"

The Black Wolf threw Lady Edith away from him as if she were a straw. She lay crushed, moaning, and half-swooning.

"Now to deal with you, Sir Insolent!" the baron hissed, drawing his sword.

The man folded his arms and looked the other calmly in the face.

"Strike!" he said boldly, "and do me the favour of striking but once and deeply. The blood drawn from me in defence of an innocent girl will wash out many a sin."

"Pshaw!" sneered the Black Wolf, sheathing his sword and turning away. "You are not worth the killing. Ho, there!" he cried to his own men, "take

the girl to the tapestried room, and see that she is well guarded"

Lady Edith was powerless to resist now. Her strength had failed her, and she lay as one dead in the arms of the man who bore her away.

"Hildron," commanded the Black Wolf, "follow me!"

The baron and his "familiar," as some called Hildron, went to a room commanding a splendid view of the woods of Deepdene.

"I know not what has come over me," the baron said. "Why did I not kill that hog that dared to snarl at me? He is but a common man-at-arms—a mere hireling, and yet I saw something in his eyes that struck my hand with a kind of palsy. Who is he?"

"He is called Carl Haydn. If it pleases you, he shall be removed."

"Ay, do it for me," the Black Wolf said. "He is a Saxon churl, for no Norman would have turned his tongue upon me in such a manner."

"He is marked for doom," Hildron replied. "He shall not survive Sir John Claire many minutes, I promise you."

CHAPTER 3.

The Guests at the Feast.

THE banqueting-hall of Deepdene Castle was one of the finest in the country.

Educated in Paris, Sir John Claire had brought home many notions of refinement quite unknown to the aristocracy in that robust age.

Instead of a rush-strewn floor there were rugs, soft and warm to the feet; the walls were hung with tapestry and coloured cloth, and the bosses of the groined roof were brilliant with blue, crimson, and gold.

At the western end was the minstrels' gallery, a magnificent work of art in carved oak.

Facing the gallery was a table, raised on a kind of dais. At this the baron and people of quality feasted, while another long table, stretching nearly the whole length of the great apartment, was reserved for the humbler guests, who were thus said to "sit below the salt."

In the great arched doorway stood Lansonne, the scrivener, with a number of armed retainers. Their duty was to scrutinise the faces of the guests as they passed in.

Ned Carter and Dick Driver were the first to arrive. They took places under the minstrels' gallery.

Then came others, some smiling, others sad and watchful, as though filled with apprehension.

Of women there were but few, and they sat silent and depressed.

Presently the sound of trumpets was heard announcing the arrival in the hall of the Black Wolf.

He was in light armour of shining steel, so thin and beautifully wrought that it yielded to his every motion, and two pages kept a magnificent robe of cloth of gold from trailing on the floor.

Heralds walked in front, sounding their silver trumpets at every few steps; and after the baron came some half-dozen knights, suitably attired for such a grand occasion.

Each man wore a surcoat, with his arms emblazoned thereon; and each had a long, straight sword at his side and poignard in his girdle, which was of gold or silver wire cunningly woven.

Then came the esquires, wearing badges on their breasts and arms; and last of all, a man with two hounds on a leash—for no banquet was deemed complete without the presence of the great hunting-dogs.

Trained to perfection, the hounds sank near the baron's chair, knowing that on their behaviour depended the quantity and quality of the food thrown to them by their master.

Proud and haughty, the baron paused at the head of the table, inclining his head in acknowledgment of the salutes bestowed upon him by the assembly.

Yet he could but mark that there was no genuine enthusiasm. He was a conqueror, but his conquest had brought fear and banished love.

No flush of welcome greeted him, and he stood frowning at the dull eyes that met his.

"By Pluto," he said, turning to a knight on his right, "one might think that we had come to eat baked funeral

meats rather than to feast heartily on good fare and be merry. Where is that knave Hildron?"

"Your slave answers you, baron," Hildron replied.

"Keep you behind my chair, and watch the churls below the salt," the Black Wolf commanded. "I like not this silence. Where is the chattering and laughter usual on such occasions as this?"

"Baron," Hildron said, leaning forward and whispering, "these people came here with no good will and would fain be away. Lansonne reported so to me."

"Let the hogs eat their fill, and then we shall see some rare sport," said the Black Wolf, grinding his teeth.

As he spoke he raised his right hand, and once more the trumpets sounded. It was the signal for the feast to begin.

Game, poultry, and joints were handed round to the guests, who used their daggers to cut such portions as pleased them best.

Silver skewers were used by a few, but as forks were unknown most of the guests employed their fingers, for in the circumstances it could not be held as a breach of etiquette for a man or woman to gnaw a bone like a dog.

Some attempt at hilarity was made at the upper table, but soon it fell flat; and below the salt there was absolute silence, save for the rattle of steel.

The guests ate on stolidly, and the Baron of Deepdene sat nursing the rage that was consuming him.

Nor did matters mend when wine and ale were passed round. Men gulped down great draughts, smacked their lips, and yawned as though they were being bored to death.

Suddenly the baron leapt to his feet.

"Clear the tables!" he shouted. "Let every man and woman sit still."

He stamped his foot, and a number of men, armed with swords and halberds, rushed into the room.

"Guard the door!" the baron cried, "and strike dead the man who attempts to leave!"

His fury had burst like a storm. His eyes blazed, a rumbling like the sound of distant thunder came from his

throat; the evil spirit that possessed him was let loose.

"Now, you slaves and varlets, listen to me!" he yelled, bringing down his mighty fist with such force on the table that everything on it danced and clattered. "I have brought you here to wag your chins and beards with good fare, and what has been my reward? Saxon pigs that you are, you have sat silent and frowning. Now you shall feast your eyes on something which will, perchance, be more to your taste. And then——"

Speech failed him. Black in the face, the veins on his brow swollen like cords, he flung himself back in his chair and pointed to the goblet he had already drunk deep from.

Hildron refilled it, and the baron, emptying the cup at a draught, flung it over his shoulder.

"Bring me hither Carl Haydn," he then said.

The man needed no bringing. Answering for himself, he strode up the hall and stood facing the baron, cool, collected, and smilingly defiant.

"Cur!" said the baron. "There is more of the Saxon than Norman in you!"

"True," replied Carl Haydn. "My mother was a Saxon."

"Get on the table that I may see you the better," hissed the Black Wolf.

Carl Haydn obeyed without a murmur. He knew what was coming, but did not blanch nor tremble.

But he looked at the white, upturned faces of the men sitting below the salt, and wondered. Would they see him murdered in cold blood, and not even plead for him?

Were these Saxons the cowards they were held to be by their conquerors and oppressors?

"Hildron," cried the baron, "bare this basely-born dog's throat and dispatch him."

A woman shrieked and fainted. The men grow paler, and a sound like a great sob went round.

Hildron drew his dagger and, walking up to Carl Haydn, flashed the glittering weapon before his eyes, saying:

"Come, take your reward."

He raised his arm to strike, but it remained as though it had stiffened into iron.

"What ails you, Hildron?" the baron demanded hoarsely. "What, have you, too, turned chicken-hearted? Strike, fool, strike! Let these hinds see that I intend to stand no nonsense with such as attempt to thwart me."

Hildron made no reply. His eyes were fixed on the door, thrown wide open to admit the air. The men-at-arms had turned away from the portal that they might see Carl Haydn die and applaud the cold-blooded deed; and so Hildron had a clear view into the courtyard.

And his eyes, fixed and glassy, were riveted on some scene there.

Suddenly the Black Wolf leapt to his feet, and with one bound was on the table.

"Give me the dagger!" he cried, snatching it from Hildron's nerveless hand.

Again the blade glittered in the air, but even as it descended a clothyard shaft came whizzing through the hall and took Hildron as its mark.

The man fell with a crash, and the baron, uttering a loud cry, sprang from the table.

Hildron had seen through the doorway what he took to be an apparition; the form of a man with steely eyes, with bent bow ready to shoot.

It was this sight that had held him powerless.

"Treachery!" thundered the Black Wolf. "Who has done this?"

The men-at-arms rushed from the hall, and then stood stupefied and amazed.

The mysterious archer was nowhere to be seen! He had vanished, as it were, through the stone walls of the castle.

With the death-cry of Hildron ringing in his ears, the Baron of Deepdene snatched a battle-axe from the wall, and rushing like a madman, overturning guests and benches in his frenzied course, joined the men-at-arms.

"Search the castle!" he cried, choking with rage. "Let no one leave the hall! This is the work of a Saxon, and the Saxons shall perish!"

Ned Carter and Dick Driver stared vacantly at each other. The death-dealing arrow was not the signal they had waited for, and they could not understand it.

Others, too, sat stricken dumb, white and shivering, for the arrow seemed to be shot by no mortal hand.

"Close the door!" the Black Wolf commanded.

It swung crashing to, and the next moment the grating of bolts told the Saxons that they were prisoners in the hands of their hated foes.

At the other end of the banqueting-hall stood the knights, esquires, and attendants with drawn swords, ready to swoop down upon the guests if they moved hand or foot.

The hounds crouched, snarling and whining, their jaws wrinkled and their backs arched.

And now through the castle rushed the Black Wolf, with the men-at-arms clattering at his heels.

They searched everywhere, but without finding a trace of the mysterious archer.

"There is a traitor within these walls," raved the baron, "and he shall not escape, even if I have to raze the castle to the ground stone by stone! To the outer lodge—to the outer lodge!"

Brandishing his sword, and striking out right and left so that the men fell back from him in dismay, he rushed to the lodge.

He saw that the portcullis was raised and the drawbridge stretched across the moat. The great wheel that raised and lowered the drawbridge was damaged beyond repair. The six men who had been left on guard there lay unconscious, trussed and bound.

The Baron of Deepdene staggered and would have fallen but for a man who caught him by the arm.

"What mean these things?" he said in awe-sticken accents. "Are they of this earth, or of the region where spirits dwell?"

No man answered him. Their hearts were quaking and their tongues tied.

Where were the men who had suddenly pounced on the guard? Who was the archer who had come upon Hildron

like a vision of sudden death and held him petrified? Which way had they all gone?

Hark! What was that?

It was a sound that grew suddenly out of the dark passages and dungeons under the castle.

On it came, louder and louder, just as a hurricane beginning with moaning bursts into a roar and sweeps everything before it.

Iron doors crashed against walls, scores of hurrying feet clattered over the stone flags, and then the vast building was filled from end to end with a mighty shout:

"Sons of the brave to the rescue! Sweet liberty or death!"

"It is the battle-cry of Robin Hood!" the Black Wolf gasped. "The rebels are upon us! Follow me! We'll to my own castle! Every man for himself!"

He fled across the drawbridge, with the men running after him, and, coward-like, left his Norman friends to their fate.

Up the stairways rushed Robin Hood and his merry men, and behind them came the liberated prisoners.

Wounded as Sir John Claire was, the passion for revenge had given him new life and the strength of a giant, and he was always in the van with Robin Hood.

On they went, Little John clutching his invincible axe, Friar Tuck with his quarter-staff, and the rest with their bows slung upon their backs, and short, double-edged swords and hunting-knives in their hands.

"I warrant me, Will Scarlet," cried Robin Hood, panting with excitement, "that you did the work of a hero when you put a shaft into that monster who would have slain Carl Haydn, and I will not forget to reward you."

"To fight for you is the richest reward that can be bestowed on a man," Will Scarlet replied. "On, on!"

"Yes, on, on!" roared the foresters, taking up the cry. "No Normans! Down with the tyrants! England for Englishmen! Sweet Liberty or Death!"

Like a tornado they swept down upon the banqueting-hall.

Two blows from Little John's axe smashed great gaps from the door, and men tore it from its hinges.

Then Robin Hood, leaping over the lumber of broken iron and wood, cried:

"Ho, there, you Saxon peasants! Now is the time to be even with the Norman oppressors."

Ned Carter and Dick Driver, throwing off their long smocks, stood in Lincoln green.

Like hounds on the scent, and panting at the leash, they had not dared to move before.

But now they were free to draw their swords and strike.

At the other end of the hall stood the Norman knights, appalled and shrinking at the sudden change that had come over the scene.

The great hounds yelped and howled as they sprang, only to be impaled on the avenging swords, and then knights, esquires, attendants, and the men-at-arms that had been posted at the back of the cross-table were flung back before the terrible onslaught of the Saxons.

"Hold! Stay your swords!"

The words, as clear and loud as a trumpet, rang out from Robin Hood.

Every man stopped, and, save for the heavy breathing of excited men, silence reigned.

"Where is the Black Wolf?" demanded the outlaw. "It is with him that I will deal first."

"You have come too late," Dick Driver said. "He went in search of the man who shot the arrow, and I doubt not but that he has escaped."

"Escaped!"

In his vexation Robin Hood stamped his feet.

"Escaped!" he repeated. "Ill-luck attends my venture here, for I had promised myself the pleasure of crossing swords with the Black Wolf. But I will run the wretch to earth yet."

"For you," he continued, looking scornfully at the Normans, "I have a punishment that will leave marks which you will not be able to rub off for many a day."

"We surrender, sir," said one of the knights, laying his sword on the table.

"Rascal, with stolen harness upon

your back, you surrender to save your base life," Robin Hood cried. "But your fate shall be that of the rest. The way to teach you a lesson is through your skins. Take them to the courtyard, my merry men, and flog them until they cry for mercy, and then turn them loose like mangy curs thrashed from the doors of honest men. What! you go down on your knees already! Ha, ha! See what kind of men they are!"

In vain did the Normans plead.

The Saxons seized them, tearing their clothes from their backs even as they were hustled through the banqueting-hall.

Soon came the swish of lash and thud of leather thong, mingled with the frantic shrieks of the sufferers.

But soon these sounds died away, and then Lady Edith Haverland, white, trembling, but happy, stole from the room in which she had been placed and joined her lover.

"This almost compensates me for my disappointment," said Robin Hood. "Sir John, I will leave some men with you until you can gather your scattered forces. I'll now to the woods, and will not come hither again until I have dealt in full measure with the Black Wolf."

In vain Lady Edith and Sir John begged of him to stay. Robin Hood turned a deaf ear to their pleadings and refused to linger longer than sufficed for his men to quench their thirst.

And then, blowing his silver whistle, he led the way out of the castle, and the darkness swallowed the outlaw and his warriors as if they had never been.

CHAPTER 4.

The Man of Peace in a Terrible Fix.

WHIR—whir—whir!

A shower of sparks flew from a grindstone as Little John sharpened his axe.

Now and then the giant took a rather rueful look at the edge. It was notched, and the stout handle of well-seasoned ash was sprung.

"This comes of breaking down doors instead of cracking Norman heads," he growled. "I have the work of two good hours here."

Friar Tuck looked on with a benevolent smile on his face.

"John," he said, "when will you be satisfied? Ever warlike, you weep because there are no more worlds to conquer."

"The bolts were outside all the time, and I knew it not," Little John said, as he set the grindstone going again.

"You were not to know that," the friar remarked. "There was no time to see how the door was fastened. By St. Anthony, who ever saw such blows? Nothing less than a wall of solid stone could have withstood them."

For three days Robin Hood had wandered in the woods of Deepdene, in the hope of coming upon the baron.

The Black Wolf had fled to his castle, and then left it hurriedly. Of that there was no doubt, for the baron's heart had turned to milk, and he saw no safety even behind the walls of his fortress.

Reinforcements had come to Robin Hood, and also a convoy of clothes, arms, and provisions.

Of the last-named there was little need, as the peasantry, in their heartfelt gratitude, not only emptied their dairies and larders for the foresters, but drove in cattle and sheep for their use.

It was evening when Little John stood grumbling over his damaged axe.

Not long before, Will Scarlet and Allan-a-Dale had come in with the news that the baron's castle was entirely deserted.

The drawbridge was up, the portcullis down, no sign of life anywhere; and the people told how in the dead of one night they had been aroused from their slumbers by the tramping of feet and horses, and knew that the Norman tyrant had started on a journey.

As if inviting the baron to battle, Robin Hood had bedecked his camp with banners, and proudly the outlaw, with Maid Marian at his side, walked among his men, praising them and lending a willing ear to their wants and wishes.

As the stars began to shine the men sat down to supper, and when their appetites were satisfied the woods rang

with their hearty laughter and joyous shouts.

For the Black Wolf might hide, but all knew that Robin Hood would track him to his lair, or force him to open conflict.

Then up rose Friar Tuck, his great, round face beaming with good nature.

"Sons of the brave!" he cried, "timely indeed are your rejoicings, and straight from your hearts, I trow, come your shouts for Robin Hood and Maid Marian, our Forest Queen! Again your king has put his noble nature to the proof. Again he has succoured the oppressed and burst the dungeon door, that the prisoners might breathe the air of liberty. True it is that the Black Wolf has escaped, but he shall bow his head and bend his knee to the King of Sherwood Forest! Who would not follow such a dauntless leader into the very valley of the shadow of death?"

The men roared with delight, but quickly hushed to silence when Friar Tuck continued:

"Fair is the lady, noble the man, rescued by Robin Hood," he continued. "He has upheld right and justice, and struck heavy blows against the Norman tyrants. The good and peaceful—including myself, a true man of peace—love him; the wicked fear and hate him. Therefore 'tis good that you should shout for Robin Hood, who shall one day reclaim his title—Robert Fitzooth, Earl of Huntingdon. Aye! shout for him, and then give a thought to Little John!"

"My faith!" growled the giant. "I knew that he would not leave me alone. Pshaw! The friar cackles too much!"

"What word is that I hear?" exclaimed the friar. "Cackle! Beshrew me, but you shall catch your own fish next Friday, and hungry enough you will be by noontide. He bewails a notched axe, and groans at splitting doors. Marry, you know how those notches came."

"No praise can be loud or deep enough for Little John," Robin Hood said, seizing the giant's great brown hand. "Right well has our beloved friar spoken of him."

"I'll fight no more, but turn friar

myself and count beads for the rest of my life," said Little John, blushing.

"For Maid Marian and myself," Robin Hood continued, "I return thanks for your good will. But see—who comes here?"

It was a man whose back was bent with years. His head was bare, a long white beard swept his breast, and he supported his trembling limbs on a gnarled staff.

"Whither away?" Robin Hood demanded. "Is it not time that you were in bed and asleep?"

"It is my custom to walk in the woods in the cool of the evening," the old man replied. "Have you heard of Athol Layne?"

"No, I know not of him, granddad."

"Granddad, truly," said the old man, wagging his head and chuckling. "Of children I am the father of seven, and seven children more sit at each of their boards."

"I cry success to all of them," said Robin Hood. "And you, old man, shall join our feast. Friar, attend to our friend."

Friar Tuck advanced and stooped, as if to hand a platter of food to the old man. Then, to the amazement and horror of everyone, the friar seized the stranger's throat and flung him on his back.

"Are you mad?" thundered Robin Hood.

Friar Tuck made no reply. Thrusting his knee into the man's chest, he tugged at the long white beard, and it came off in his hand.

"A spy!" cried the friar, triumphantly. "A Norman spy! Look to it, Robin Hood, the Normans are at hand! This scullion thought to engage our attention while the foe stole upon us."

The baffled spy uttered a cry, and almost immediately through the thick foliage there came a volley of crossbow bolts.

One forester threw up his arms, sobbed out "Revenge!" and rolled over on his face.

"Down, all!" cried Robin Hood, as he hurried Maid Marian away. "To your bower with you, woman—sweet-heart. Trust me, no Norman shall come

nigh you. Ho, there, Little John! Ho, there, Will Scarlet, and all you sons of the brave and the free! hold back the foe until I return."

Snatching up their bows, the foresters rushed to cover, while their chief, lifting Maid Marian in his strong arms, carried her away. The battle was at hand, and Robin Hood, eager, yearning for it, stayed only to speak a few words to Marian ere he came rushing back.

His only fear was that the coming darkness might serve the more heavily-armed and steel-clad Normans, for light was essential to true aim with the bow.

Clad in trustiest mail, and mounted on a powerful horse, the Black Wolf sat at a distance in the midst of fifty troopers. The baron had sent his bearded spy—as Friar Tuck had said—to engage the attention of the honest foresters while his footmen came on in open order.

Suddenly they closed up and delivered their volley.

Luckily for Robin Hood and his gallant foresters a strong position on rising ground had been chosen for the camp; but the outlaw, skilled as he was in forest warfare, knew that the Black Wolf had reckoned well his strength and chance before attacking. A fight to the bitter end was at hand.

Robin Hood's brave little army now comprised just under a hundred men, the Norman's twice that number, since the Baron of Deepdene had scoured his estate and its neighbourhood for men skilled in arms.

The King of Sherwood Forest passed the word that his men were to remain in ambush, and not shoot a single arrow until the command came from him.

His object was to draw the Normans out of the mossy dell in which they had ensconced themselves amid the wild undergrowth, and then to deliver a withering discharge of arrows.

These tactics had the desired result.

The Normans, believing that the foresters had turned faint-hearted and retired, came on quickly.

The Baron of Deepdene followed the example of his crossbowmen, and shouting, "Charge—charge! Cut down the base Saxons! Death to the traitor,

Robin Hood!" spurred his horse brutally, and rushed blindly to the attack.

Suddenly there rang through the air the words, "Archers of Sherwood, do your duty like men!" and then the darkness became darker still with hissing shafts, shot low, and delivered with all the strength of the Saxons' muscular arms.

Many a Norman fell to rise no more. It was too late for the baron and his troopers to turn back.

The horses brought them onwards, in spite of tugging at the reins. Helter-skelter they came, jostling each other, riding over the crossbowmen and scattering them in all directions.

Again and yet again came those terrible arrows. One crashed against the baron's doubly-mail-clad chest with such force that he reeled in the saddle, but he remained unhurt.

And still the Normans, thirsting for revenge, came on, but without organisation and practically without a leader, for the Black Wolf, believing that he was wounded, pulled his horse round and galloped from the field.

Still the shafts flew through the air, and the glade rang with groans of pain and cries of deadly hate and rage.

"Up, lads! and fight them hand to hand!"

So cried Robin Hood; and his men, answering with a shout of joy, joined issue with the Normans.

Bursting from cover they met the foe hand to hand, and as Robin, fighting like a lion, with Little John on his right and Friar Tuck banging away like fury on his left, heard the clash of arms and ringing of bucklers, he knew that the god of battles was with him, and all apprehension vanished from his mind.

Encouraging his men with words and splendid deeds of valour, the outlaw seemed to bear a charmed life.

At the sight of him the boldest Norman fled, and soon a panic took place in the ranks of the enemy.

The struggle ended as suddenly as it had begun, but Robin Hood was not satisfied.

Running hither and thither, he shouted challenges to the Black Wolf to meet him hand to hand. He hurled

taunts at his cowardly head, called him dog and scum of a base race; but the Baron of Deepdene was too wise to take up the gauntlet.

Sick at heart he fled, so badly beaten that not one-fourth of the men he had brought into the field stood unhurt.

The foresters were bent on following up the pursuit still further, but the night had now settled down in earnest and Robin Hood called them back.

Brief had been the struggle—dire and brief, for when torches were brought and the roll called, Robin bewailed the loss of ten good men, while there were at least twenty wounded.

And yet how great had been the victory! His face flushed with pride as he praised his followers there in the forest where he had called a halt.

"Sons of the brave!" he cried, "once more I hail you as heroes!" Then, turning to Little John, "Where is Friar Tuck? He was in the last charge with us. I did not see him fall."

"Nor I," replied the giant. "By the rood, the last time I saw the old man he was skipping as merrily as Jack-o'-the-fair among the Normans, and above the din I heard the crack, crack of his quarter-staff on many a Norman skull that will ache no more."

"But where is he?" demanded Robin Hood, with a sudden sinking of his heart. "Sound the horns! Ho, there, Will Scarlet, and you, Allan-a-Dale, speed away to the right and left; the friar must be found!"

Not only did the men called upon answer to Robin's call, but a dozen others.

"I have no fear for the friar," Little John said, laughing. "I doubt not that he is trouncing some Norman at this very moment."

"It was wrong of him to go on without us," Robin Hood responded.

"As for that," rejoined Little John, "I should have done so had you not clutched me by the arm."

Then they stood silent, waiting. As time went on the men began to look anxious, for no glad bugle-call announced that Friar Tuck had been found.

And then, one by one, the scouts

came sadly back. Friar Tuck had disappeared. If he were not dead, or badly wounded and hidden in some bush or hollow, there perhaps breathing his last, he had fallen into the hands of the Normans.

Robin Hood was in despair.

What was victory worth without the good old man who had followed him in all sorts of fortunes, and suffered so much uncomplainingly, so unselfishly?

What would the greenwood tree be without Friar Tuck sitting under it?

"If he is slain, I'll have a terrible revenge!" Little John cried, swelling with fury. "I'll go forth alone to-night. I'll——"

"Stay!" said Robin Hood, placing his hand on the giant's shoulder. "I have an idea, which I will impart to you anon. But now let us attend to the wounded."

By the light of torches, the sufferers' hurts were dressed by such rude surgery as the foresters knew; the brave dead were buried. Then the foresters returned to the camp.

The last to return found Will Scarlet in command, for Robin Hood and Little John had left, saying no more but that they would return in the morning.

Leaving them for a time, it behoves us to follow Friar Tuck and tell what befell him.

Never had the man of peace fought with greater resolution; never had he delivered such smashing blows as when Robin Hood gave the order to charge the Normans.

And as the enemy turned and fled Friar Tuck ran on, unconscious of the fact that Robin Hood and Little John were no longer near him.

Suddenly he discovered that he was alone. He stopped and, leaning on his quarter-staff, wiped his heated face.

"My faith!" he said. "Surely I am a pretty man of peace. May I be forgiven for bringing so many Normans down. I can count six, but if Robin asks me I'll hold my tongue, for it is not the office of a friar to strike hard blows. Now will I return, and thankful I shall be to rest my limbs."

Scarcely had he spoken when an arm shot from a bush, a hand grasped his

ankle, and down he went so heavily as to knock the breath out of his body.

As he lay gasping and kicking feebly a gag was thrust into his mouth, and then two brawny Normans seized him and hurried him away.

At first all this seemed like a dream to Friar Tuck; but he soon became conscious that he was surrounded by at least a dozen dusky forms, who, treading cruelly on his heels and kicking him, put resistance out of the question.

The poor old friar, with his cheeks puffed out pudding-wise, was compelled to keep pace with his captors, and so, more dead than alive, he went on for a mile or so until a halt was called.

The Normans bound the friar to a tree while they consulted among themselves as to what should be done with their captive.

Some were for hanging him, others were for striking off his head, while more than one declared that nothing less than burning would meet the enormity of his crimes.

Friar Tuck gave up all hope. The end had come at last, he told himself, and so, crossing his hands humbly on his breast, he resigned himself to his fate. He tried to console himself with the thought that, even if he were burned at the stake, his sufferings would be as nothing compared to those inflicted on the early Christians in the time of Nero, when men, women, and children were sewn in the skins of wild beasts and attacked by savage dogs for the sport and pleasure of a still more savage people.

The Normans were still disputing as to the mode of his execution when one stepped to the front. Said he:

"Let us take him to the baron. I trow that the Black Wolf will reward us for bringing him so rare a prize as Friar Tuck."

After a good deal of arguing this was agreed upon, and the friar felt considerably relieved when they started again through the woods.

Harshly and brutally they treated the old man, binding his hands behind his back and buffeting his face if he halted a moment for want of breath, or even stumbled.

But the friar gave no sign of pain, anger, or complaint.

Hope that springs eternal in the human breast now buoyed him up. Robin Hood would miss him, and the outlaw was not the man to desert even the most humble of all his followers in the time of need.

That awful journey seemed as if it would never come to an end, but at length, just when Friar Tuck felt that he must drop from sheer fatigue, no matter what the consequences might be, a voice in the darkness challenged.

It was answered, and joyously the Normans told of their capture.

"We have taken Friar Tuck!" cried one.

"Here we have the villain who bartered his life for a quarter-staff fashioned by the Evil One!" roared another. "But the fiend has deserted him at last, and we have him here. Where is the baron?"

The Baron of Deepdene was not far away. He had come scatheless out of the fight, disgraced, infuriated, and no man durst speak to him of what had happened.

A coward himself, he accused others of cowardice.

He swore that his troopers had pressed him to the front and then basely deserted him, and he spoke of his crossbowmen as white-hearted and unworthy of fighting with children.

Such as were with him ground their teeth with rage, and walked apart, lest in a moment of fury they should answer him.

They were hirelings and time-servers, every one; and seeing in the diminished ranks the chance of promotion, they held their peace and bit short the words that rose to their lips.

To Black Wolf was brought the news that Friar Tuck had been taken.

"Bring the wretch to me!" he cried, beating the air with his mailed fists.

Dishevelled, parched with thirst, and so weary that he could scarcely drag his feet over the ground, the friar was hailed before the Black Wolf.

"Welcome—a thousand welcomes!" snarled the baron. "Have you come to preach a sermon to us? Out of your

charity, are you here to say Mass for the souls of good Normans slain by the tusks of Saxon boars? Ha! he cannot speak! Take the gag from his mouth. 'Tis shame and pity to silence so eloquent a tongue. Now cut the cords that bind him. I'll find him better things for his wrists anon."

Two men with torches stood near the baron, and the ruddy light fell on his face, contorted with every evil passion that his devilish nature could command.

"I'll think no more of what has happened now that I have him in my power," he went on. "Bring him closer to me, that I may look into his face. What, still silent? Have you even forgotten to mumble a prayer? Dog! Rascally priest!" He raised his mailed fist and beat the friar about the head.

Friar Tuck struck back, and the blow, taking effect between Black Wolf's eyes, sent him staggering.

"Liar, knave, coward, and murderer!" cried the friar. "Do with me as you will. I fear you not. I defy you, your threats, and your tortures!"

"By my sword!" the baron roared, "you shall rue touching me with your dirty hand."

"If my hand were not cleaner than your heart and soul, I would cut it off and fling it away in disgust!" Friar Tuck retorted. "Miserable wretch, you know what I say is true, and flinch!"

"Flinch, you vagabond priest!" the baron hissed through his teeth. "A thousand agonies shall make you flinch, and were I not weary they should begin now. Away with him! Call me at dawn, and I trow I'll find the means to make the rebel father confessor sing a different tune. Bind him afresh; give him neither food nor water. I'll attend to him in the morning."

CHAPTER 5.

A Rescue 'Gainst Fierce Odds.

THE scampering of a squirrel in the topmost branch of a tree and the twittering of a bird told that night was passing away.

And the night that had promised to be so fair with twinkling stars and bright moonlight had been dark and

gloomy. All through the dreary hours the wind had moaned dismally, as if droning a funeral song over the newly-turned graves of the dead.

Yet through the pitchy blackness two men wended their way with never-faltering step.

For hours Robin Hood and Little John crept stealthily onward, intent on rescuing their good friend Friar Tuck, or finding some means of accomplishing that if it lay within the power of humans to do it.

Never was Robin Hood more determined. And woe-betide the Normans if they did serious harm to Friar Tuck. He (Robin Hood) would wreak a terrible vengeance, even if it meant calling in the help of every Saxon capable of wielding a sword or pulling a bow-string from Sherwood Forest and his other strongholds.

It seemed odd at first blush that the outlaw king and Little John should venture out alone; but, after all, it was a wise proceeding.

The foresters did not know what had befallen the friar, but if Robin Hood had advanced in force, and come suddenly upon Normans who should happen to have Friar Tuck in their custody, the natural inference was that they would slay the old man rather than give him up, or before they took to flight.

And so, with love and fear and hope in their hearts, the giant and Sherwood's king had gone fearlessly on.

"The day will break with sunshine soon," Little John said, pointing upwards.

The black clouds were breaking into grey rifts, with here and there a streak of blue, the sure sign that the day would be fine.

And soon they had another sign, for the rooks flew to their feeding-grounds without curving or swerving on the way.

Robin Hood and Little John seated themselves beneath a tree. They begrudged every moment, but feet burning with fatigue and aching bones must be rested, no matter how the heart aches or throbs for the body to press onward.

A herd of deer rushed across the path so close to them that the antlered lord turned and lowered his head as if bent on charging, but seeing that his hinds and their fawns were safe, sped bellowing triumphantly after them.

"Come, Robin," said Little John, "share the contents of my wallet and look not so downcast. The man who eats not loses his strength, and he who loses strength loses heart. I hear the sound of water running from a spring, and will fill my bottle. Then we'll dip our hands and faces in the stream, and, thus refreshed, go forth again."

Robin Hood lent a willing ear to the giant, who had never lost heart. Whatever Little John might have felt he kept it to himself, and uttered no word that had not a cheerful ring.

"My faith!" he said, "were it not for warning the Normans of our approach, I would sing. See! here are the tracks of the varlets; they came this way, and in a hurry, too. Look you! some of these footprints overlap each other, a sure sign that there was no order. Heaven bless the rain that fell so heavily yesternorn to leave the earth so soft and yielding!"

Robin Hood dipped his hand into the giant's capacious wallet, and, taking out some dried venison and bread, began to eat. Little John also fell to, pretending to have an enormous appetite, although the food stuck so often in his throat that he was fain to gulp it down. He went to the spring and filled up his bottle.

A little bird with blue wings and yellow body perched above his head whistled "Ker-chee," as though it were lonesome and glad to see him, and a butterfly, gorgeous in its marvellous raiment of black, blue, and gold, fluttered in his face and lit on his shoulder.

The giant took no notice. He loved such little things as these. The man used to fighting until the muscles of his arms failed him, the man who thought that the severing of the head of an ox with one blow of his axe was not worth boasting about, had a tender reverence for the beautiful fragile things that lived in the woods and forests.

"I almost wish," said Little John, as he returned to Robin Hood after the insect had spread its wings and leisurely soared away, "that I was a butterfly myself."

This made the outlaw chief laugh so immoderately that the crimson showed through the tan of his face.

"What wings you would require!" he said. "Heaven help us! what an idea!"

"Not a bad one," replied Little John. "Look at me, a great lump of uselessness lumbering about the world. Why, yonder butterfly sees more and enjoys more in one short day than I shall in all my life."

"John," said Robin Hood, shaking his forefinger at him, "we shall have you writing verses yet. It is a bad sign in a man, so be careful. Now, were you in love, I could imagine you comparing your sweetheart to a dove, or a flower; but you a butterfly—ha, ha! You make me laugh, while I should be thinking of the task we have set ourselves. So up and forward. The sun is coming with its brightness and warmth to make us forget that we were ever tired."

They washed at the spring until their faces shone with the glow of health and strength and then strode on again like giants refreshed, as if their eyelids had never drooped with weariness.

Strode on, yes, but cautiously now, picking their way with light footsteps, stepping over fallen branches and twigs that might snap under the slightest pressure. They felt sure that at least some of the fugitive Normans could not be far away.

Not a word was exchanged between them. Silence was golden now, and so they crawled from bush to bush, from tree to tree, until they came at length in sight of a number of Normans seated in a circle.

In the middle was a man, who, judging by the way he flourished his arms and gesticulated, was making a speech or hammering some argument into the heads of his audience.

Robin Hood and Little John drew nearer, gliding noiselessly over the ground.

Suddenly the giant darted into a hollow tree, and the chief of the outlaws sank from view in the undergrowth.

The Norman went on talking and gesticulating.

"Believe it or believe it not," he cried, "but what I tell you is honest truth. Unless the Baron of Deepdene hastens to his castle, and fortifies it well, too, Robin Hood and the rebels he has trained to fight and shoot so well will be upon us."

"The baron," said one of his hearers, "has reserved Friar Tuck for torture. There is to be a sort of mock trial, for the baron will not be denied the sport of seeing the changes that will work upon the old man's face, and then will come the beginning of the end."

"Blame me not if trouble comes of this," said the speechmaker. "I met a man in the wood not an hour ago, and he swore to me that Robin Hood and his men were making a forced march, and that daybreak, or soon after, would see the Saxon outlaws upon us."

"How knew he that?" demanded one of his companions.

"I did not ask him. I took him at his word."

"More fool you! But here comes the baron."

"Begone!" snarled the Black Wolf. "Get you to the brook, for it is time you washed the grime from your faces. Pah! Are you the same men that turned out so spick and span yesterday? Death of my life! at the very best you are a dirty crew. Ha! so you have returned, Gilstraw! Have you seen aught of those rebels?"

Gilstraw repeated what he had imparted to his comrades, and the baron was impressed.

"If that be so," he said, "the friar shall die without delay, and we will then to the castle. Bring forth the rebel."

These words reached the ear of Robin Hood, and his heart gave a great bound.

He had not dreamed that there was a man in England, Norman or Saxon, who would dare to take the life of a

father of the Church in cold blood; but Black Wolf evidently had no qualms.

What was to be done?

Raising his head, Robin Hood caught sight of Little John, and saw that the giant's face was working with fury and rage.

Soon came the friar, dragged along by five soldiers.

"Get you gone!" roared the baron to the rest. "See that the horses are ready. When Robin Hood comes, perhaps the sight of the headless body of the friar will strike terror into his heart."

Not far from where the baron stood lay the trunk of a tree, and, pointing to it, the Black Wolf said, as he drew his sword:

"Place his base neck upon it, and I will sever it from his shoulders."

Poor old Friar Tuck! No sign of fear was on his face. He was ready to die, and his heart did not fail him at that awful moment.

"Farewell, Robin Hood! Farewell, all!" he said. "This is a poor ending for a man of peace. Fain would I have laid down my life on the open field. Never again shall I hear the glad cry, 'Sweet liberty or death!' Yet will the sons of the brave avenge my death. Rascals, there is no need to use such force."

Then, looking the Black Wolf fearlessly in the face, he cried:

"Tyrant, I am ready!"

"Baron," said one of the soldiers, "shall we remove the cords that bind his arms?"

"No! Down with him!"

Then Robin Hood dropped on one knee, and Little John stole, axe in hand, from the hollow tree.

Swiftly flew an arrow from Robin's bow, making a flesh-wound in the Baron of Deepdene's neck, and as he dropped his sword and shrieked with pain a roar such as an angry lion gives burst from the giant's throat, and bearing down upon the five soldiers he attacked them with such fury that they fled headlong, without waiting to strike a single blow in return.

The Black Wolf also took to his heels. Once more Robin Hood sent an arrow

after him, but the shaft glanced from a tree and fell to the ground.

In the meantime Little John had slashed through Friar Tuck's bonds and, lifting him like a baby in his arms, run back to Robin Hood.

"Chief," said the giant, "we must away, or all is lost! To cover, and then look to the friar. Leave me to fight, if fighting must be done."

Friar Tuck could not speak. So great was the reaction that he could do no more than look the thanks his tongue refused to utter.

But, as Little John had said, no time was to be lost. The baron's cries brought his men about him. Hastily they bound up his wound, and hearing no sound of an approaching host, and guessing that two men only had succeeded in rescuing Friar Tuck, they became wonderfully brave.

Horse and foot, fifty strong, rushed to the attack, and found no sign of foe or of Friar Tuck. They nevertheless spread out in the form of a crescent and began to scour the woods.

"Friar," said Little John, as the three foresters crouched in the shelter of a friendly bush, "rouse yourself. One more effort, and if we die our bodies shall be found close together."

"I am better now," the friar replied. "I thought it was all a dream. Alack! I have lost my quarter-staff, and am without a weapon."

"Take my sword," said Robin Hood. "I have my bow and twenty arrows, and, 'fore Heaven, each one shall make a Norman howl! Back! Back! I can see them now."

"Let me charge them," Little John said. "What matter if I fall? I'll hold them at bay while you and the friar speed along. It is best that it should be so, Robin, for it is impossible that we can all escape."

"Stay, I beg—nay, I command!" Robin Hood cried, as the giant was on the point of rushing forward. "What would my men say if I returned to tell the tale that I left the battle to you? Stand aside, and let me bring yon black-muzzled varlet down. Would that he were the baron, for the man dies!"

Whiz! The arrow crashed into the Norman's breast. Death came with such swiftness to the man that for a moment he stood as if nothing had happened.

Then his hands went up to his eyes, and tottering, he fell without cry or groan. But his comrades had seen, and quickly they sought cover, lest other arrows should encompass their own end.

Little John, throwing aside all caution, shouted in his joy.

"Well done! Well done!" he cried. "See how the varlets hide!"

"Yet do they hem us in," Robin Hood said. "The time is coming, Little John, for you to use your axe. Friar, how fares it with you?"

"You shall see when the Normans draw nearer," Friar Tuck replied.

CHAPTER 6.

Robin Settles Accounts with the Baron.

At that moment there came a sound that made Little John raise his voice and send another shout ringing through the woods.

It was the winding sound of a horn. And hard upon it came another and still more welcome sound—the galloping of horses, mingled with the hurrying of feet.

And yet another sound still.

"Sons of the brave to the rescue! Sweet Liberty or Death!"

Fifty or more foresters, led by blue-eyed Maid Marian, burst into view.

Mounted on her favourite palfrey, and waving a sword on high, she urged them on.

"To the rescue!" she cried. "To the rescue! Save the King of Sherwood Forest! Save Little John and Friar Tuck!"

The Normans stood appalled, entrapped, and with no alternative left but to fight for their lives.

"Down with the Saxon dogs!" cried one. "Keep your ground! We'll not be beaten by them!"

"Marian—sweet Marian!" exclaimed Robin Hood, as he swept onward at a mad gallop. "Come back to me! You are courting death!"

If she heard she made no answer. The love she bore for the King of Sherwood Forest, and the thought of the danger he was in, made her reckless of all danger.

Straight at one of the Normans she rode, and parrying the blow aimed at her, cut him down.

But Robin Hood had seen what must happen, and he uttered a wild shout of dismay as half a dozen Norman troopers closed round Maid Marian and bore her away.

Others of the foe set up a cry of triumph, and rallying, met the Saxons face to face.

Maid Marian, overcome and exhausted, had sunk upon her palfrey's neck, her lovely hair tossed like a billow of gold upon her shoulders, while a Norman knight clutched her arm to prevent her from falling.

Then again did the Black Wolf emerge from his hiding.

Reinforcements had come to his aid, and, in spite of all the foresters could do, it seemed that the day must be his.

And how they fought—those men in Lincoln green!

Little John's crashing axe did dreadful execution, while Friar Tuck, weak as he was, struck like a true warrior.

But Robin Hood, who saw his sweetheart being dragged away before his eyes, was the man of that battle.

The sight put renewed strength into his body, and with every drop of blood tingling in his veins, he, snatching a sword from the ground, rushed into the thick of the foe.

The Black Wolf, with his eyes ablaze with hate, had now taken the knight's place, and throwing his arms round Maid Marian's waist strove to lift her on to his own horse.

"Hold, craven! Hold, dastard!" Robin Hood shouted, striving with all his might to get within reach of the baron.

The Black Wolf saw him coming, and knowing that once he was within reach of the sword wielded by the outlaw his doom was sealed, he released his hold of Marian and fled to the rear, yelling:

"Give no quarter to the Saxons!"

"The brand of a coward rest for ever

on his brow! he will escape again!" Robin Hood cried.

Then he reached the troopers, and as they retreated before the fury of his blows, Maid Marian fell to the ground almost at his feet.

Panting with rage and grief—for it seemed that Marian was badly hurt—Robin bore her to a mound and gave her into the care of some of his men.

"Charge! Charge!" shouted the Normans. "Death to the Saxon churls! Death to the Saxon thieves!"

"Steady, my men!" cried Robin, springing into the action again. "Sweet Liberty or Death! Die where you stand rather than surrender! Courage! Courage!"

"No quarter! No quarter!" roared the Black Wolf.

Then both sides closed and became a mass of contending humanity.

The shock was terrible. Troopers reeled and fell, footmen staggered, prayed, and died; but above that awful din one voice was heard:

"Courage! Courage! Fight on! Sweet Liberty or Death! Sons of the brave, fight on!"

A Norman knight went down under Robin's sword, and as he went headlong to the earth the outlaw wrested his battle-axe from his hand.

Five swinging blows cleared his path, and he was face to face with the Baron of Deepdene.

"Now, Black Wolf," he cried, "we are more fairly matched. Here we stand, axe to double-handed sword, a coat of Lincoln green against coat of mail."

"Vile rebel," the baron retorted, aiming a blow at Robin's head. "Down you go, and tell the fiends that I sent you!"

"They shall see you first," said the outlaw chief, avoiding the stroke.

Then he delivered another, and the baron fell.

"Do you surrender?" demanded Robin Hood, standing over him with the axe.

"I must," the baron gasped.

"The Black Wolf surrenders!" Robin cried. "Ho, there! my brave men, fight on! The day is ours!"

Seeing that their leader was down, a cry of dismay went up from the Normans. No longer they hesitated, but wheeling around, fled into the woods.

Little John, Will Scarlet, Allan-a-Dale, and others dashed after them, but quickly returned for fear that there might be other foes to attack those they had left behind.

"By the saints!" said Robin Hood, "we have had enough bloodshed to-day. See that the Black Wolf does not escape. I go to Maid Marian."

The girl had fainted, and now lay prone upon the ground.

"Marian," said Robin tenderly, as he sank on his knees at her side, "open your eyes. The battle is done. The victory is yours, for, unless you had come to my aid, I must have been slain—ay, and Little John and Friar Tuck, too."

Slowly her blue eyes opened and looked into his.

"Are you hurt?" Robin asked.

"No. Oh Robin, I am but a weak woman and faintness overcame me."

"And yet, love of mine, you rode forth to my rescue."

"When I heard that you and Little John had gone in search of Friar Tuck I could not rest, so I called for fifty volunteers," Maid Marian replied. "Need I tell how gladly they flocked to me? And, oh! Robin, if I have rendered you and our noble Little John and Friar Tuck the slightest service, it is because I was willing to lay down my life for you; because of my love for the sons of the brave—because, Robin, I love you with all my heart!"

Robin Hood kissed her fondly, and after seeing the rosy colour return to her face he returned to the prisoner.

"Baron of Deepdene, or Black Wolf, which is your better title," Robin Hood said, "you have seen how these sons of the forest can strike for dear liberty. Wretch that you are, I will take no mean advantage of you, although you have sown misery and death in many Saxon homes. Answer me truly, and tell me what fate you deserve."

The fierce look of hatred came again into the baron's eyes. Without hope of escape, it would not do to play the

coward, although his heart was shrivelling within him.

"Who made you righter of wrongs?" he demanded. "By what authority do you roam through the woods and forests, from town to town, plundering and slaying people to whom the land belongs by right of conquest?"

"By what right prate you of authority?" cried Robin Hood. "Persecution has strengthened my arm, and I will go on until I have cleared such tyrants as you from the face of the earth. Braggart you have been with men-at-arms at your back, cruel and heartless to your victims; but you have run to the length of your tether. Death must claim one of us. Ho, there! give him a sword."

A ray of hope came into the Black Wolf's heart. It was a faint one, but he clung to it as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

He had heard that Robin gave a fair chance to the foes he fought with hand to hand, and he knew that if he conquered he would walk away a free man.

"Here's at you, then!" he cried, clutching the sword thrown to him by Will Scarlet.

"At you!" retorted Robin Hood.

Their blades crossed and bent under the pressure put upon them.

Thrust and parry, blow for blow they gave as, walking slowly in a circle, they kept their eyes fixed on each other.

Suddenly the Black Wolf summoned all his strength for one decisive blow and delivered it. His sword swept past Robin Hood as the latter leapt aside, and then the outlaw brought his blade across the baron's neck, and the Black Wolf fell to rise no more.

"Remove these remains of a tyrant," Robin Hood said, as he turned away. "Thus perish the enemies of justice, the oppressors of the poor."

CHAPTER 7.

At the Revels of Wivenfrew.

ROBIN HOOD had settled accounts with the Black Wolf, but there yet remained other work for Sherwood's king to do.

About twenty-five miles from Deepdene stood the pretty town of Wivenfrew.

The lord of the manor was in times gone by a Saxon franklin—a kind, good man. No beggar was sent hungry from his door, and in those days the "Strangers' Hall," a long, airy apartment, was never empty from morn to eve.

But the good Saxon lay in his grave, and Sir Geoffrey Hassault reigned lord and master in his stead.

One night Sir Geoffrey the Norman had come armed with a warrant signed by Prince John, which warrant commanded the franklin to deliver up his house and lands to Sir Geoffrey.

The command was made under the pretence that the franklin had broken the laws and incited the Saxons to open rebellion.

There was a battle, with the usual result when the odds are ten to one.

Many of the poorly-armed peasantry were slain, the franklin made prisoner and hanged after a mock trial, and Sir Geoffrey issued a proclamation to all Saxons to submit to his laws or suffer death.

Some fled, leaving their goods and cattle rather than bow the knee in homage to the tyrant; but there were others with wives and little children, who, if left homeless, would starve and die in the woods, and these came in to pay unwilling homage.

For more than six months Sir Geoffrey kept his iron hand from descending upon the unhappy people.

A kind of truce was patched up, but it was like a smouldering ember that only required a puff of wind to set it glowing and flaming.

One morning Sir Geoffrey Hassault was out hunting with his guests. As was the custom of the nobility in those days, a grand show was made to impress the poor. There were gaily-attired knights and ladies, men clad in splendid liveries, pages carrying hooded falcons on their wrists, hounds on leashes, and a small army of retainers.

A stag was started and killed. Then Sir Geoffrey's pet falcon was set flying at a heron and brought it down amid the plaudits of the company.

So the Normans rode on until they came to the common lands still held by

the people for the purpose of grazing their cattle and rearing poultry.

Wivenfrew Common had once been miles in extent, but the greedy Norman had seized it, acre by acre, until it was a mere patch of ground with but one house standing upon it.

This dwelling was a cottage occupied by Adwulf the Woodcutter. His wife was dead, but Matilda, his daughter, attended to the household duties while her father was at work.

Matilda had a sweetheart named Jocelyn, a fine, well-set-up lad, fond of many sports, and as honest as the day.

Jocelyn had refused an offer of employment in Sir Geoffrey's household, preferring to work in the fields rather than eat the bread and wear the livery of a usurper.

On this particular morning Matilda and Jocelyn were standing under the porch talking to each other, and watching the approach of the hunting-party with none too pleasant thoughts.

Over their heads hung a cage containing a dove.

The door was open, and at a word from Matilda the dove flew upon her shoulder and nestled its downy body against her face.

"Matilda, put the bird away and carry the cage indoors," Jocelyn said. "Sir Geoffrey has brought his falcons with him——"

"Surely Sir Geoffrey would not be so cruel as to kill my pet," the girl interrupted.

"These Normans are cruel enough to do anything, especially if it gives pain or annoyance to Saxons."

Matilda took the dove in her hand, but anxious to be at liberty, it escaped and began flying in a circle round the cottage.

"See! what did I tell you?" Jocelyn exclaimed. "Sir Geoffrey has let loose his falcon. Where is your father's bow? Quick!"

Matilda rushed indoors and brought out bow and arrow, and in another moment the falcon stopped on the wing, quivered, and fell dead.

Black in the face with fury, Sir Geoffrey Hassault rode up to the door.

"Whose work was that?" said he.

"Mine," replied Jocelyn boldly. "I killed the falcon to save the dove. Sir Knight, this land belongs to the Saxons. It is all they can boast of as their own, and little enough, too. By the charter granted them they have a right to protect their lives and all living things against wild animals and birds of prey, so, by shooting the falcon, I have broken no law."

"Truly," Sir Geoffrey replied, forcing himself to be calm, "I had forgotten the charter. I did wrong to loose the falcon. Pah! what is a falcon to me when I have a hundred others? Jocelyn, you are a fine hand at the bow. There are not many so keen of eye and unerring of aim. You should win the great prize of a purse of nobles at the revels."

Sir Geoffrey gave the signal and the party passed over the common, down the dell, and so out of sight.

"Trouble will come of this," Matilda said, weeping.

And so it happened.

Before the end of the week the cottage took fire mysteriously in the middle of one night, and Adwulf and his daughter were compelled to fly for their lives to a neighbour's, a mile distant.

Adwulf set about repairing the damage, slaving at his task during most of the hours which he usually devoted to resting his weary limbs.

One night Matilda, having prepared the evening meal in the neighbour's house, waited for her father to return from his labours. Alas! she waited in vain.

Adwulf was never seen again. What became of him none could tell.

Jocelyn consoled his sweetheart as best he could. He threw off the lad and became the man.

Night and day he toiled, and the greater part of the wages of his toil he laid at Matilda's feet.

"In a year hence," he said one night, as he held her tearful face close to his heart, "we will marry. Courage, sweetheart! Your father may not be dead. There are dungeons and other evil places under Sir Geoffrey's castle. Yes, you must take courage in any case, for the revels are drawing nigh, and I will

win the purse of nobles or the folks shall call me fool without bringing a blush of shame to my face."

"How brave you are!" Matilda said. "You give me new hopes. Good-night, Jocelyn. Take not the shortest path through Sir Geoffrey's grounds, lest the rangers be waiting for you with their crossbows. If I lost you, Heaven only knows what I should do!"

"Fear not; I will be wary," Jocelyn replied, and waving his cap he bounded away.

He took the long, straight road to the village.

Save for some bushes, and here and there a tree, the road was so open that the fields stretching on both sides could be plainly seen, for dikes and hollows were more used in those days than hedges.

It was a clear moonlit night, and Jocelyn, with a lighter heart than he had carried since the day he had seen his betrothed stricken with grief at the loss of her father, hurried towards his humble lodgings.

"Phsst!"

The lad stopped. No bird he knew of uttered so strange a sound, and indeed it seemed to come more from the ground than the air.

"Phsst!"

Jocelyn's flesh began to creep on his bones. What could it be? Not a living creature could he see, and as for the wind, there was none to account for so strange a noise.

He was making up his mind that his senses had played him a trick, when from behind a tree glided a hooded form.

Weird and awful it looked in the moonlight, and Jocelyn, with his heart thumping against his side, had turned to run when a voice said:

"Silly boy to be frightened at a friar. Come hither and fear not."

"I thought you were a ghost," Jocelyn said, catching at his breath.

"A ghost is but a shadow, and who ever heard of a shadow having one if its own?" was the reply.

The hood fell back and revealed the face of Friar Tuck.

Much relieved and reassured, Joce-

lyn was advancing, when another form, and this time a gigantic one, with a head of tousled hair and unkempt beard, came into view.

"This baby will do you no harm," Friar Tuck said, seeing that the lad started back in alarm. "Surely you have heard of Little John?"

"Yes," said Jocelyn, lost in wonder, "I have heard of him. Who has not?"

"Then you behold him, and in me you see the man of peace commonly known as Friar Tuck."

"Can it be possible?" exclaimed Jocelyn, in a transport of joy. "If you speak truth—and why should I doubt it?—Robin Hood must be near at hand."

"Ay," pointing to the woods, dim and misty in the moonlight, "he is there. Come with us and we will take you to him. Robin knows what has happened, for his scouts have been in Wivenfrew for some days; and I'll warrant that he'll welcome young Jocelyn, who loves fair Matilda."

The Saxon lad blushed up to his eyes, and he hung his head before the smiling friar's gaze.

"When love is honest it comes from heaven," Friar Tuck said.

"When it is not it comes from the other place," Little John put in, with the air of a man who had made a great discovery.

"That is how this baby prattles," said Friar Tuck; "but who can be angry with him, since he is such a willing infant? See that axe he bears over his shoulder. It is as much as an ordinary man can lift, but Little John whips it about in the air like a straw, and everything goes down before it. My son, shake hands and be friends."

Here was an adventure that Jocelyn had never thought of in his wildest flights of fancy.

Friar Tuck and Little John! And Robin Hood and his merry men, too, not far way, and waiting to see him!

It seemed almost too good to be true; but true it was, for Little John, having swallowed up Jocelyn's hand in his great brown palm, bade him take Friar Tuck's arm and marched on in advance.

These two wonderful men seemed to

know the country even better than Jocelyn.

They took short cuts, where the trees threw long black shadows and the soft earth gave forth no sound to their footfalls.

And so the dark line of woodland rising above the hills drew nearer and nearer and began to take definite shape, when a streak of light suddenly flashed out, danced hither and thither, and then disappeared.

"A will-o'-the-wisp," said Jocelyn.

"With red stockings—Will Scarlet by name," responded the friar. "He bears a lantern with a cover that shifts swiftly from side to side. Now will I answer the signal."

The friar imitated the cry of an owl, and again the light appeared.

Then they quickened their pace to a run, and in a few minutes plunged through a narrow path in a thorny thicket, many feet high, and Robin Hood stepped forward to meet them.

"Welcome, lad," said the outlaw, holding out his hand. "Nay, be not so shy, for although my people call me king, and I am indeed an earl, yet am I but a man after all. Jocelyn, can you keep a secret?"

"Ay, that can I, especially if it be such a one as will do you service," Jocelyn replied.

"Gallantly spoken," returned Robin Hood. "What I have to show you concerns you and your sweetheart more than myself. Follow me. See, here is a bower. Look into it, and tell me what you see."

"Adwulf the woodcutter—Matilda's father!" exclaimed Jocelyn in amazement.

"Ill and weak, unable to speak, but uncomplaining," Robin Hood said. "We found him some days ago, gagged, bound, and thrust into a hollow tree to starve and die. Say naught of this to man or woman, but go to the revels, and perchance you will see something there more astonishing than shooting at a target for a purse of nobles."

"Heaven bless you for this!" Jocelyn cried, with tears of gratitude in his eyes. "Matilda——"

"I adjure you to keep your tongue silent, even to her," Robin Hood said. "Swear that you will do so, or I will turn from my purpose and never enter Wivenfrew."

"I swear," Jocelyn replied.

"Then," said Robin Hood, pressing a piece of money into the lad's hand, "get you gone, for this is no place for you. If you are as good a bowman as I have heard, I may soon find good work for you."

"Command me."

"If I do," said Robin Hood, "I shall not ask you to shoot at a target of cloth and straw."

All next day Jocelyn kept purposely away from Matilda. He durst not go near her for fear, in the fulness of his heart, he forgot his vow and blurted out the joyful truth.

But the next evening the lovers met, and then from day to day until the one before the revels.

Sir Geoffrey Hassault had not forgotten the killing of his falcon. He had nursed it in his heart and marked it down for revenge. Jocelyn was a Saxon, and nothing would be easier than to rouse up the hatred of the Normans against him, and put the incident down as the result of a common brawl.

As soon as the sun rose all sorts of people poured into Wivenfrew—showmen, gipsies, yeomen, mountebanks, hucksters, vendors of toothsome dainties, horse dealers, and of lusty beggars such a number as made the people stare.

The knights and gentles with their ladies did not make their appearance until the sun was well up, when everything was in readiness for the revels and sports to begin.

The scene was a gay one. From the castle, frowning down upon a grassy plain, floated many a banner, and great festoons of flowers and evergreens hung from the battlements and across the gateways.

The prizes to be shot for were exhibited on a table. They consisted of a purse of money, bows, swords, tunics richly embroidered with lace, hunting-horns, belts fitted with sheath-knives, crossbows and shields.

Crowds of people were about.

Armed men and retainers wandered among the villagers and strangers; but all went well, and there was not a jarring note of discord when Sir Geoffrey Hassault and his guests appeared on the scene.

A loud flourish of trumpets rang out as the party left the castle; and an imposing and gorgeous spectacle they presented.

Sir Geoffrey Hassault was splendidly attired. Over his burnished armour he wore a crimson robe, and from his belt—or baldric, as it was then called—there hung sword and dagger, with hilts of gold set with gems.

The trumpets sounded again, and the sports began.

Soon came Jocelyn's turn to try his luck with the bow. Three shafts he shot, and each one pierced the centre of the target.

"This is nothing less than witchcraft!" one of the competitors shouted. "Sir Geoffrey, did you ever seen the like?"

"Never," Sir Geoffrey replied, with a grim smile wreathing his lips. "But be not too hasty to accuse our young Saxon friend of dealing with the dark arts; though who can tell?"

"Dark arts!" Jocelyn cried, knowing full well that death was the punishment meted out for witchcraft. "Dark arts! It is as false as the tongue that wagged just now about witchcraft."

"We will not talk of such things now," Sir Geoffrey said. "The prize is neither lost nor won. The range has been at one hundred yards; the next is double that distance. Ho, there! you Norman archers! Let it not be said that you were beaten by a mere ploughboy!"

Jocelyn felt his face flush with anger, and he was on the point of throwing his bow down in disgust when two things happened.

He saw Matilda in the crowd, watching him with that wistful earnestness with which only a girl in love can watch her swain. He saw, too, a sturdy beggar, wearing a patched cloak that covered him from head to foot, and an old hat which concealed the upper part

of his face, swagger as though in a half-drunken state, into the range.

"Hold!" cried Sir Geoffrey. "Since this vagabond makes so bold as to come near us in his filthy attire, he shall make sport for us. Give him a bow and a shaft, and if he fails to strike the target another arrow shall speed after him and I trow he will show us how he can use his legs. And who shall shoot at him but Jocelyn, the Saxon?"

"And what if I should fail to hit him?" the lad demanded.

"It would be an act of disobedience which I should find hard to pass over," Sir Geoffrey Hassault replied. "You who can hit a target so easily could not miss a man, unless you did so purposely. Besides, have I not seen you hit a falcon on the wing?"

"Give me a bow," said the beggar. "I'll take my chance. But see to it, Norman noble, if I win I claim the prize!"

A burst of laughter came from the lips of Sir Geoffrey, and it was taken up by the crowds of people.

The sturdy beggar walked to the two hundred yards' mark, and carelessly adjusting the arrow, swung round on his heels, took aim for a moment, and then let the bow-string twang.

Straight as though drawn by an elastic cord attached to the target the arrow flew, and buried itself in the bull's-eye—a mere black speck at that distance.

The silence of awe and wonder fell upon the crowd. Calmly the beggar walked to where Sir Geoffrey sat, and said:

"Norman, I have another arrow here," producing it from under his cloak; "and if I had failed to hit yonder mark, I would have made sure of another."

"What mean you, rascal?" Sir Geoffrey demanded.

The beggar's answer was drowned by an uproar. The people found their tongues at last. Some cheered, others groaned, and others shouted:

"Unfair! unfair! It was a chance shot!"

"Fair or unfair," said Sir Geoffrey, "this is a most insolent knave, and his

prize shall be a sound beating. Stay! Let him take up the bow again. Let him shoot off the other arrow."

"And if I hit the black dot again," said the beggar, in a sneering tone, "I shall have two beatings instead of one. I'll not shoot this arrow. Give me another if you will, but this I retain."

"For what reason?" Sir Geoffrey demanded.

"If I am shot at, why should I not shoot back again?" the beggar said. "If I found myself in such a strait, I'd make sure of my mark, I promise you."

His words were so full of meaning that Sir Geoffrey could not fail to understand them.

"The ragged villain would shoot me," he thought. "I must conciliate him until after the contest, and then my men-at-arms shall pounce on him suddenly and render him harmless. Give him an arrow—ay, two—and I'll wager twenty nobles against ten that he does not strike the bull's-eye once!"

"I accept that wager!" the beggar cried.

"You!" exclaimed Sir Geoffrey, in surprise; then, bursting into a laugh, "Well, Sir Ragged Coat, the wager is made."

The stranger smiled as he took the two arrows handed to him.

"These will not do," he said; "there is a flaw in both. I will make my own selection. Let me help myself from your quiver," he added, turning to Jocelyn.

All eyes were now fixed on the stranger as he chose two shafts; then, with more care than he had shown before, he bent his bow and drew the string until it almost touched his right ear.

The arrow flew so wide of the mark that the crowd broke into loud cries of derision, and Sir Geoffrey clapped his hands with delight.

"Did I not say that the first was a random shot?"

"Then call this so," said the stranger, discharging the second arrow.

Swifter than swallow on the wing flew the shaft, cutting away the arrow remaining in the bull's-eye and piercing the very centre.

"A marvel! A miracle!" roared the

people. "Who is this man? He comes to us disguised! Let him declare himself!"

"Be not so hasty!" the beggar shouted back. "The sports have but just begun. Here are Normans waiting to take their chance. What! do they hold back? Then I claim both the prize and the wager."

"Hold!" cried Sir Geoffrey, crimson with fury. "This is quite irregular. I am reminded that all competitors must furnish us with their names and information as to where they come from."

"My name is Forest," the beggar replied, "and the king's highway is my home when I like to make it so."

It was then seen that the other vagrants who had poured into the town were beginning to gather round, and a sense of uneasiness fell upon the Norman knight.

"My men shall shoot," he said. "Let the sports go on."

One after another the knight's most famed archers put their skill to the test, and failed ignominiously. Many of their arrows did not even reach the target; and the stranger had the laugh completely on his side.

Nor was he alone in the ridicule which he poured upon the other competitors.

The villagers laughed until their sides ached, and the Normans, growing angry, began to mutter threats through their beards.

"Forest wins fairly!" cried a man. "Pay him the money and let him go."

"Yes, pay him—pay him!" shouted a hundred voices.

Finding which way the tide was turning Sir Geoffrey had no alternative left but to give way.

"There is the money," said he to the beggar, forcing a smile to his lips, "and if you will but enter my service I will pay you handsomely and lead you against that arch-rebel, Robin Hood."

"I fear me much that I should not overtake him if I walked round England and back again."

"How so?" Sir Geoffrey demanded. "You speak in riddles. Explain your meaning."

"Not long ago Robin Hood was at

Deepdene, and 'tis said he slew the baron known as the Black Wolf with his own hand. How, then, can I tell where to find the outlaw?"

"That," said Sir Geoffrey, "is not an answer to my question. I will have it, or you shall see the inside of one of my dungeons."

"Have a care, Sir Geoffrey Hassault!" Forest replied, lifting his head proudly. "It is a poor man who has not some friends in this world. You see in me a Saxon; and for that reason, and because you are surrounded by armed men, you think you can taunt and threaten me with impunity."

"A Saxon!" Sir Geoffrey exclaimed. "By my halidom, I thought so! Listen, you people whose ancestors wrested the crown from Harold, the traitor, this man has come to spoil the revels. By the splendour of the stars he shall be detained until we have spent a pleasant day, and then I will decide what shall be done with him."

"Hold! Not so fast," cried Forest, stepping back as two soldiers advanced to seize him. "The man that touches me shall die!"

"Away with him!" thundered Sir Geoffrey.

Forest put a silver whistle to his lips, and at the shrill notes a change came over the scene.

The rags dropped from the beggars clustered around, and they became men clad in Lincoln green, armed with bows and swords.

Then the man who had called himself by the name of Forest threw off his disguise, uttered a loud laugh, and cried:

"How can I overtake Robin Hood, when I am Robin Hood himself?"

Half-dazed at the revelation, Sir Geoffrey Hassault turned his eyes to where the woodlands met the green, and saw a body of archers led by a friar flourishing a quarter-staff, and a giant bearing a huge axe upon his shoulder.

"Now do I defy you," Robin Hood said. "Now do I hurl your threats into your teeth, Sir Geoffrey. Ay, and now will I bring you to book. Ho, there! Send your shafts into the Nor-

mans if they do but move a hand. Adwulf."

Little John stepped into the midst of the archers and brought forth a man whose pale face and thin bony form proclaimed that he had been snatched from the very brink of the grave.

Matilda started forward and stretched out her arms.

"Father! Father!" she cried. "Not dead, but restored to me! Oh, the joy of it!"

Sir Geoffrey Hassault sat as if the spectacle had turned him to stone. He tried to speak, but nothing save some incoherent sounds came from his lips.

As in a dream he saw his guests skulking away and his men-at-arms helpless to act, for directed towards them were those arrows that never failed.

"Listen," Robin Hood cried. "Listen, all of you. He who sits yonder in shining armour and silken coat is a villain and a murderer. By his orders was this poor man's house burnt; by his orders was this man Adwulf seized, gagged, bound, and thrust into a hollow tree. And had I not chanced to pass that way, he would have perished miserably."

By this time Matilda had taken her father in her arms, and both were sobbing in their joy.

"Oh, monster!" Robin Hood continued, shaking his fist at Sir Geoffrey. "Tyrant! usurper! Here am I to tell you that the world shall be troubled by you no longer! Outlaw I am, but better be outlaw a thousand times than a murderer. Ho, there! make him prisoner; and you men who serve him throw down your arms, or I bid my archers shoot. This way, Little John and Friar Tuck. I may have need of you."

The sight of the giant as he came striding along, the broad blade of his axe glinting in the sun, struck awe into the hearts of the Normans.

As Friar Tuck moved forward a soldier stood in his way; but one tap of the quarter-staff—delivered, as the friar afterwards said, accidentally—sent him spinning.

"By the Conqueror!" cried one of the Normans, flinging down his sword,

"I will not suffer myself to be spitted like a lark."

The rest followed his example, and then Robin Hood, rushing up to Sir Geoffrey, tore the robe from his shoulders and dragged him to his feet.

"You are my prisoner," said the outlaw, "and as such you must go with me as I will. Jocelyn, follow me. Adwulf, bring your daughter. There are other places besides Wivenfrew where a man may work. You shall live where you are free and at peace."

At this moment there was a movement in the crowd.

"To your horses, all of you!" Robin cried. "The man who thinks of following me and my archers had best take a good look at the sun, for 'twill be his last."

As the Normans hung back and stood huddled together, Friar Tuck, leaning on his quarter-staff, said:

"This is a beautiful sight for the eyes of a man of peace to gaze upon. And mark you, all; the day will come when you will go down on your knees and thank Heaven that Robin Hood came hither to-day."

As the King of Sherwood formed his men and marched away at the side of the crestfallen Norman knight, the soldiers, no longer fearful of Sir Geoffrey, rushed to the castle with the view of looting it.

They met the women and the guests coming back with wonderment and dismay written on their faces.

"Go back!" one cried. "The castle is already in the hands of some of Robin Hood's men. Never was a trap laid so skilfully! As we reached the lodge a man in Lincoln green stepped out, and laughing in our faces, said: 'I and my comrades bide here until Robin Hood returns. Whatever the castle contains will be distributed among the poor.'"

Black were the looks when these words were spoken. Strong men stood and ground their teeth in helpless rage, for they could do nothing.

"I'll to London, and see Prince John," said one of the knights.

"My faith!" cried another. "I trow that Prince John has had enough of Robin Hood already."

And so they departed, and the joy of the day, so far as the Normans were concerned, was turned to woe and gloom.

The people wandered about, some reviling Sir Geoffrey, some pitying him; but none could recall one good action that he had done.

"If," said one, "he had let the Saxons bide in peace, this would not have happened."

One man in particular had great reason to agree with the last speaker, and that man was Sir Geoffrey Hassault.

Just as the sun was going down Robin Hood and his men marched back through the village of Wivenfrew and took possession of the castle.

Sir Geoffrey Hassault, grim and crestfallen, was in their midst. He knew that he was going to his death—to die upon the walls of his own castle.

And yet there was one hope. In the fortress there were many secret passages, and if perchance Robin Hood imprisoned him in one of the apartments instead of a dungeon, he might contrive to escape.

Of trial there would be no need, for his deeds proclaimed him guilty; still, he would plead for time.

"Good priest," he said, turning to Friar Tuck, "you have the ear of Robin Hood. There are certain works of restitution I would perform ere I die. Ask Robin Hood, I pray you, not to hurry me out of the world, but give me a few hours for reparation and repentance."

"I fear he will not trust you," Friar Tuck replied. "Robin Hood has good reason to mistrust all Normans. Why should he extend to you what you laughed to scorn—the very name of mercy?"

"I expected to hear different words from your lips, friar," Sir Geoffrey said.

"It is no joy for me to utter them. You have brought your own fate on your head; but since you ask me to intercede with Robin Hood, I will do so."

Friar Tuck fell back to the outlaw's side and engaged in earnest conversation with him for some moments.

"I fear to grant him longer time than is sufficient for him to make his peace," Robin Hood said. "Tell him that I will grant him an hour, and not one moment longer."

An hour? How soon the minutes would slip away!

As Sir Geoffrey passed under the yawning portcullis, he turned and looked wistfully at the beauty and life upon the land, now glorified by the golden sunset.

How lovely and entrancing it was! How hard to know that his eyes would never open upon such a scene again.

"Outlaw," he cried, in an agony, "you have conquered me. As you are powerful, be merciful."

Robin Hood did not answer him.

"You do not speak," Sir Geoffrey cried. "You gaze on me with dark and fearsome looks."

"Would you have me smile while you call me outlaw?" Robin Hood demanded. "Outlaw I am in name, but, villain, you are worse than outlaw, for you have broken the laws of justice and humanity. Talk with me no longer, but call the friar to your side, for the sands of your life are running out. Here is a room, so take him within, Friar Tuck, and at the appointed time the executioner shall relieve you of your prisoner."

Icily cold perspiration poured down the Norman's face.

"King of Sherwood Forest," he cried, "will not Adwulf take compensation for the wrongs I have done him?"

"Your fate is in my hands and you must die!" Robin Hood replied, sternly, and turning on his heel he walked away.

"Look well to the Norman," said Little John, tapping Friar Tuck on the shoulder. "He may attempt to strangle you, as a revenge for knowing that he cannot escape himself. Better let me send a man in with you."

"No," the friar replied. "Since it is Robin Hood's desire that I should minister to the doomed knight, no ear but mine shall hear what he says."

"You know best," Little John replied. "Go, then, but doubt not that I will be within call."

Tremblingly Sir Geoffrey entered the room; but no sooner was the door closed than he turned upon the friar in fury.

"Hypocrite and murderer in the guise of a priest!" he yelled. "I'll have none of your prayers or mummary! The plan that was in my mind has failed, for yonder giant waits without. Oh for a weapon, that I might destroy you first and then myself!"

"Wretch, there is no hope for you," Friar Tuck said. "I had thought to show you a way to heaven, even at the eleventh hour, but I have done with you, although from my heart I pity you. Go your own way."

Although warned by Little John the friar did not expect that Sir Geoffrey, prisoner as he was, would attack him; but as with uplifted hands and genuine sorrow he turned towards the door, the Norman sprang upon him.

Taken by surprise Friar Tuck dropped upon his knees. Sir Geoffrey Hassault's hands encircled his neck like bands of iron, and so gripped him that he could utter no cry.

Down on the floor the Norman pressed him, the friar struggling but feebly, for his brain had taken fire.

His tongue swelled in his throat, his eyes protruded from his head, and it seemed that the groined roof was descending upon him.

Then there came a sound like the cry of a man who has fallen over a precipice, a blinding flash of light, and then all was darkness and oblivion.

"What did I tell you? Pin the villain against the wall, and throw the rope that is to hang him round his neck."

These were the words thundered by Little John.

He had burst into the room just in time to save Friar Tuck; and now, driven to desperation, Sir Geoffrey Hassault fought and struggled like a wounded panther.

And while they bound him Friar Tuck opened his eyes and, lolling his head on Little John's arm, said:

"Surely the man of peace thought that he had done with this world. Twice have I narrowly escaped with my life; but, John, while I am devoutly thankful, these things are telling on me."

"You shall be revenged for your hurts," Little John replied. "Come to the ramparts and see the rascal hang."

"Not so; fain would I rather rest, and even say to him, 'Go in peace,'" the friar responded. "Let me be, John, and hasten back when all is over."

In less than an hour the body of Sir Geoffrey Hassault was buried by torch-light, and then horns sounded from all parts of the castle and the gates were thrown open.

The poor people of the surrounding districts swarmed in, shouting for joy, for the tyrant was dead and never again would his hand of iron be lifted to crush them.

But Robin Hood silenced the jubilant voices while he gave to each a share of the loot and bade him return home.

There were no signs of merriment that night between the walls, and when morning came the castle was deserted, for Robin Hood and his band had disappeared.

After leaving the castle during the still hours of the early morning the men in Lincoln green rested awhile in the woods. Then as the sun rose they resumed the march to where Robin Hood had left Maid Marian.

Friar Tuck, quite recovered and as jovial as ever, headed the foresters and beat time with his quarter-staff as they sang a rousing song in honour of Robin Hood and Maid Marian.

"By my faith," said Little John, as the song ended on a thrilling, jubilant note, "I hope I may die with such a greenwood jingle ringing in my ears."

"And so say I," replied Robin Hood. "Ho, boys, we'll see our glade soon. You have sung to Maid Marian, and I trow the sound of your voices has already reached her ears."

At that moment a man appeared from the thicket.

"How now, sirrah?" roared Robin Hood. "What sent you hither prying? Quick with your errand, for, mark you, we are out of the lair here."

"Why, look you!" cried Friar Tuck. "The man is none other than Simon Patch, the jester, disguised as a ranger."

"True," replied Simon Patch. "All night long have I waited and watched, and now I go to tell that you are close at hand."

And he sped away before any could stay him, intent on being the first to take the good tidings to Maid Marian.

There were joy and feasting beneath the greenwood tree that day—aye, and dancing too—until the foresters, tired at so much rejoicing, were glad when the time came to sleep.

And rest they stood in need of, for it so happened that there was other work in store for Robin Hood and the Sons of the Brave, as future books of this series will chronicle.

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